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ENGLISH INTEREST IN THE ANNEXATION OF CALIFORNIA ¹

ALL histories treating of the Pacific Coast devote much attention to the question of English interests in, or designs on, California during the period from 1838 to 1846. In any brief treatment of this subject, only the more important points can be considered, and this article is therefore confined to the larger aspects of the case customarily stated by historians. When the various suspicions directed against Great Britain are summarized, they are found to deal with three points: first, a mooted transfer of California to the English bondholders of the Mexican debt, with the ultimate object of making California a colony of Great Britain; second, a project for the immediate and direct transfer of California to England by sale or gift from Mexico; and third, specific instructions to British admirals upon the Pacific Coast looking toward the accomplishment of these designs. Up to within a very recent time, it has been possible to do no more than to present negative evidence against an assertion of such designs or plans. Now, however, by the recent opening to research of the Records of the British Foreign Office to 1850, it is possible to determine whether or not English foreign secretaries knew or cared anything about California. It is the purpose therefore of this article to state the results of an examination made into the documents preserved in the Record Office in London with special reference to the question of British designs upon California,² for it is certain that if any definite plans ever existed upon the part of the English government, or were even favorably received by English ministers, they would find some place in British contemporary correspondence.

¹ The substance of this paper was presented before the meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, at Berkeley, California, November 21, 1908.

² The Records thus examined covered the period from 1838 to 1846 inclusive, and were found in the series of despatches to and from the diplomatic agents, both ministers and consuls, in America, Mexico, and after 1841, in Texas. In addition, search was made in the Admiralty Records for the same period, although these are by no means complete, owing to the destruction by an official at the Admiralty Office of the greater portion of the despatches of the Admiralty of this period—a destruction covering not merely the Admiralty Letters to and from the Pacific Coast, but Admiralty Letters from stations all over the world. It was, however, possible, in the lack of the letters themselves, to use for these years the “Digest and Précis” of Admiralty Correspondence, which gives in condensed form the substance of each letter sent out or received.

Setting aside, then, all the various rumors prevalent at the time, and confining attention to the evidence secured from the Record Office, it appears that the very first interest in California, manifested by British agents, arose as a result of the arrest of English and American citizens in Monterey, in April, 1840, for an alleged conspiracy intended to overthrow the authority of Governor Alvarado.³ These foreigners, some two score in number, were transported to Tepic, under the charge of Josef Castro, and there claimed the protection of Barron, the British vice-consul. In his report to Pakenham, at Mexico, upon the incident, Barron, while taking the necessary steps to secure indemnity for the "injustice" done to British subjects, was nevertheless primarily concerned that no British ship of war was at hand to be despatched to Monterey. He was in fact compelled to appeal to the commander of the United States corvette, *San Luis*, and to entrust to him the investigation of the causes of the trouble in California. In the subsequent correspondence on the adjustment of the difficulty, much praise is given the American commander for his prompt and generous services,⁴ but the necessity for such aid irritated both Barron and Pakenham, and both men urged an increase of naval strength in the Pacific.⁵

In the beginning, then, Pakenham was interested solely in the question of British naval prestige, and there is no evidence that he had any real knowledge of the situation in California. Soon after this, however, he received several communications from Barron, stating the great value of Upper California, and at about the same time, he had a long conversation with one Forbes, who had been a resident of Monterey.⁶ Also, Pakenham learned of the journey through California of a Frenchman, Duplot du Morfras, and apparently became somewhat suspicious of French designs upon the Pacific Coast. The result was that on August 30, 1841, he addressed a despatch to Palmerston, advocating a plan which should ultimately secure California to Great Britain.⁷ He wrote:

It is much to be regretted that advantage should not be taken of the arrangement some time since concluded by the Mexican Government with their creditors in Europe, to establish an English population in the magnificent Territory of Upper California.

He then stated the terms of an agreement concluded in 1837 between the Mexican government and the British bondholders of the

³ F. O., Mexico, 136, Barron to Pakenham, May 12, 1840.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137, no. 78, Pakenham to Palmerston, August 22, 1840.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 136, no. 65, Pakenham to Palmerston, July 5, 1840.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 145, no. 43, Pakenham to Palmerston, June 10, 1841.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 146, no. 91, Pakenham to Palmerston.

Mexican debt, by which it had been arranged that in place of a repayment in cash to the bondholders they were to be permitted to locate lands within the boundaries of the Mexican state, to colonize them and to receive revenues from them. Some few attempts had been made and plans put forward to realize this scheme, and the Mexican government had offered to allot a large quantity of such lands in the province of Texas. Meanwhile, however, Texas had risen in revolution and had thrown off Mexican authority, so that the proposal seemed absurd to the bondholders, and it was now desired to find lands elsewhere that might be thus organized. Pakenham continued:

. . . as relates to Texas, the arrangement must of course, be considered a dead letter; and in the present circumstances of the Country, Chihuahua, and New Mexico are not eligible districts for colonization: but I believe there is no part of the World offering greater natural advantages for the establishment of an English colony than the Provinces of Upper California; while its commanding position on the Pacific, its fine harbours, its forests of excellent timber for ship-building as well as for every other purpose, appear to me to render it by all means desirable, in a political point of view, that California, once ceasing to belong to Mexico, should not fall into the hands of any Power but England; and the present debilitated condition of Mexico, and the gradual increase of foreign population in California render it probable that its separation from Mexico will be effected at no distant period; in fact, there is some reason to believe that daring and adventurous speculators in the United States have already turned their thoughts in that direction.

He then gave details to show that it would be easy to form a company in England, "for the establishment of an English colony in California", and to prove its certain success as a business venture.

If it were to be known that an enterprise of this kind would receive the sanction and support of Her Majesty's Government, properly qualified persons would readily be found to carry out the plan; and I am sanguine enough to believe that the result would be the establishment of a prosperous colony united in feeling and interest with England, and at the same time the attainment of an object, in my humble opinion, of the highest political importance. I need scarcely observe that any foreign Settlement in California would for some time to come be nominally dependent on the Mexican Republic; but this state of things would not last forever, nor, while it did last, would it, I imagine, be attended with serious inconvenience.

If it were to be understood that Pakenham here reflected English governmental opinion, it would be certain that England was looking forward to the breaking-up of Mexico, and that she was not averse to profiting by the disturbance. In reality, Pakenham merely stated his own opinion—an opinion evidently moulded by Barron

and Forbes. Certainly, it must have appeared to the British cabinet that its agent in Mexico was pursuing a curious policy in thus coolly planning for the ultimate seizure of a part of that state at a time when his instructions ordered him to aid Mexico in every possible way in the establishment of a strong, united government. Pakenham did not himself believe that Mexico would ever be able to unite under a republican form of government and become a strong power, but his idea of the inevitable disintegration of the Mexican state was not as yet shared by his superiors at home. His recommendation in regard to California had been addressed to Palmerston, but before his despatch could reach England a change of government had brought Aberdeen to the Foreign Office.

Aberdeen's reply promptly put an end to Pakenham's dream of a British colony in California. The latter's despatch had been referred to the Colonial Office, and the reply of Stanley from that office to Aberdeen was now transmitted to Pakenham without comment from the Foreign Office.⁸

His Lordship directs me in answer, to acquaint you for the information of the Earl of Aberdeen, that he is not anxious for the formation of new and distant Colonies, all of which involve heavy direct and still heavier indirect expenditure, besides multiplying the liabilities of misunderstanding and collisions with Foreign Powers. Still less is Lord Stanley prepared to recommend the adoption of a plan whereby the Soil shall, in the first instance, be vested in a Company of Adventurers, with more or less of the powers of Sovereignty and of Legislation, and the Settlement so formed be afterwards placed under the protection of the British Crown; which as it seems to his Lordship is the position contended for by Mr. Pakenham.

This reply is, in truth, a concise statement of the entire British attitude at the moment and represents the almost unanimous opinion of English statesmen that the day for colonial enterprise had passed. Such opinion is illuminative of British policy as regards both home and colonial politics, and to neglect it would be totally to misunderstand those conditions in English government at the moment which practically negative any suspicion of British designs for expansion in *any* new territory, wherever that territory might be located.

Pakenham perfectly understood the indifference of Great Britain to his plan and he himself at once lost interest in it. In fact, he even neglected to appoint a vice-consul at Monterey at the time, permission to do which had been previously granted to him,⁹ and it was not until after Commander Jones, of the American navy, performed

⁸ F. O., Mexico, 143, no. 13, Aberdeen to Pakenham, December 15, 1841, and *ibid.*, 151, Dom. Var., G. W. Hope to Viscount Canning, November 23, 1841.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 143, no. 6, Palmerston to Pakenham, February 26, 1841.

his spectacular feat of seizing and releasing the Port of Monterey, in the fall of 1842, that Pakenham bestirred himself to appoint a British agent there. The man appointed was James Forbes, who was to act as vice-consul, and who was to be subordinate to Barron, located at Tepic, on the Gulf of Lower California.¹⁰ These men now became the centre of British interest in California, although other sources of information were available, for it was in this same year that Sir George Simpson wrote his impressions of California and transmitted them in letters to officials of the British government.¹¹ Like Simpson, Barron and Forbes were confident that it would require but little activity on the part of the British government to secure California. Throughout 1843 their reports were numerous,¹² containing frequent and suggestive allusions to American designs upon California, and so, somewhat adroitly paving the way for a definite proposal. This, in 1844, Forbes was prepared to submit, although even here the proposal was again veiled in the form of a request for advice. This plan, originating with Forbes in September, was transmitted by Barron to Aberdeen on October 12, 1844, and it was received in London upon December 13, a date which it will be important to remember later in estimating the reply made by Aberdeen.¹³

On September 5, Forbes had reported to Barron the circumstances of an interview with a body of influential native Californians. These men asserted that the Mexican government had reached such a state of inefficiency that they were planning to revolt in order to

¹⁰ F. O., Mexico, 155, no. 120, Pakenham to Aberdeen, December 25, 1842. The appointment of Forbes was made immediately after Pakenham heard of Jones's act at Monterey. This act was reported by Pakenham in his no. 119, of the same date as the preceding.

¹¹ The most important of Simpson's letters were published in the number of the AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW for October, 1908, and need not be expanded here. It is interesting to note that about the time of Simpson's letter, Ashburton, who was negotiating the Treaty of Washington, was writing of a hint made to him by Webster that the United States would yield somewhat in the Oregon matter, if Great Britain would acquiesce in the American occupation of California. Ashburton also expressed his disbelief in the value of California, for a long time to come, to the United States or any other power. Ashburton's letter is also of interest in view of Webster's later denial that he had ever made such a proposal, F. O., America, 379, Ashburton to Aberdeen, April 25, 1842.

¹² F. O., Mexico, 156, Admiral Thomas to Barron, Valparaiso, August 12, 1842; Barron to Aberdeen, December 7, 1842, and again December 20, 1842; *ibid.*, 161, Barron to Pakenham, December 20, 1842; *ibid.*, 165, Doyle to Aberdeen, December 30, 1843; *ibid.*, 167, Barron to Admiral Thomas, January 18, 1843; Barron to Aberdeen, April 15, and September 9, 1843; Forbes to Barron, October 19, 1843; *ibid.*, 179, Barron to Aberdeen, January 20, 1844.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 179.

establish an independent government. After describing all the evils which California had suffered under the misrule of Mexico, Forbes was asked "whether this country [California] can be received under the protection of Great Britain, in a similar manner to that of the Ionian Isles, but to remain for the present under the direct Govt. of one of its natives, though under the same form as the Govt. of that Republic". The reply of Forbes was that he was "entirely unauthorized" to enter into any such affair. The deputation assured him that their only desire at present was that he act as "an organ of communication with the English Government. If he would do this, his correspondents would quietly await until he should learn the pleasure of H. Majesty's Government." Forbes reported to Barron that he had been most careful not to compromise the English government in any way, and that he certainly would not meddle without authority, but he added:

I feel myself in duty bound to use all my influence to prevent this fine country from falling into the hands of any other foreign power than that of England. I repeat that it is impossible for Mexico to hold California for a much longer period, and if the Govt. of Great Britain can with honor to itself, and without giving umbrage to Mexico, extend its protection to California, reaping those benefits which by proper management, would infallibly attend that protection, I should presume that it would be impolitic to allow any other nation to avail itself of the present critical situation of California for obtaining a footing in this country.

In this connection, Forbes stated that there were several standing offers of French protection, giving as his authority the word of native citizens of California. He mentioned Du Morfras as being the agent in one of these offers of French protection, but added that at the time the offer was made the people were not so ready to act nor so united in sentiment as they now were. And Forbes also stated that if Great Britain was at all interested in the project of a colony upon the Pacific Coast no reasonable comparison could be made between Oregon and California, thus indicating that he, like Barron, thought that possibly an arrangement might be made by which British interests in Oregon could be exchanged for a position in California. Barron made no detailed comment upon this report but in transmitting it, he stated:

I shall of course caution him most earnestly not to interfere in any manner of way in the promotion or conduct of any revolutionary proceedings, and I am sure such will be his conduct. It is not for me to express any opinion on the subject of Mr. Forbes' despatch, otherwise than to say, that this fine country has been totally neglected by Mexico, and she must ere long see some other nation its protector, or in absolute possession of it.

In the light of later events the plan proposed to Forbes and reported by him to the British government may seem of no moment when compared with the energy displayed by the United States, but the incident is of the greatest importance in this account because the report of Forbes brought out the most direct and positive instruction given by the British government in regard to California throughout the eight years from 1838 to 1846. Before stating Aberdeen's reply, however, it is necessary to explain the conditions existing with regard to other Mexican interests at the exact moment when the report of Forbes reached the British Foreign Office. These conditions are peculiar, for the month of December, 1844, records a strange lapse in the otherwise consistent attitude regarding Mexican relations—a lapse which was strictly temporary (lasting less than a month) and wholly explainable. The situation was this: in the spring of 1844, after it became evident that the United States was actually planning for the annexation of Texas, Aberdeen became greatly exercised over the possibility of such an expansion of the American state. He sought in various ways to bring about an international situation which should prohibit such an annexation. He instructed Elliot, the British chargé d'affaires in Texas, to use all his influence against a Texan acquiescence in the projects of the United States.¹⁴ He urged upon Mexico the necessity of immediately recognizing the independence of Texas, in order that by some sort of joint diplomatic action, France, Mexico and Great Britain might guarantee the independence of the Texan state.¹⁵ The British ambassador at Paris, Lord Cowley, was active in securing French consent to this plan and supposed that he had so secured it.¹⁶ Pakenham, who was now the British minister at Washington, was instructed to act cautiously, yet with decision in the matter. The complete details of the negotiations, looking toward this end are too minute to be given here, but in substance it may be said that one element in the failure of the plan was the stupidity and obstinacy of Mexico, which could not bring itself to yield to British advice, and to recognize the independence of Texas. Time after time, acting under instructions from Aberdeen, Bankhead, the new British minister at Mexico, pressed upon Santa Anna the necessity for a prompt and speedy

¹⁴ F. O., Texas, 20.

¹⁵ F. O., Mexico, 172, no. 16, Aberdeen to Bankhead, June 3, 1844; F. O., America, 403, no. 25, Aberdeen to Pakenham, June 3, 1844; F. O., Mexico, 180, Domestic, report drawn up of interview between Aberdeen and Murphy, Mexican minister in London, May 29, 1844.

¹⁶ F. O., Texas, 20, copy of despatch, Cowley to Aberdeen, Paris, June 15, 1844.

recognition of Texas. The answer returned to him in every instance was that an army was now being gathered in Mexico for the immediate reconquest of that province.¹⁷ Neither Bankhead nor Aberdeen believed that Santa Anna really thought the reconquest of Texas a possibility, and Aberdeen was angered at the refusal to follow his advice and play Great Britain's game. In the summer of 1844, Pakenham reported his conviction that the United States, should it determine upon the annexation of Texas, would not be deterred therefrom, even by a threat of war by England and France.¹⁸ This report was decisive in its effect on Aberdeen's policy, for he had no desire to carry opposition to annexation to the point of war with the United States. Nevertheless, he had already gone so far in overtures to France and Mexico, that a formal withdrawal of the plan was not at once possible. On December 2, Cowley reported from Paris that France was becoming lukewarm in any project looking toward the guarantee of Texan independence.¹⁹ In the same week, there came from Mexico, a final report by Bankhead stating the utter impossibility of bringing the Mexican government to recognize the independence of Texas. The effect of all these changed conditions upon Aberdeen was an immediate change of attitude. Instead of using at least a threat against the American annexation of Texas, as had clearly been his intention earlier in the year, he turned against Mexico, and for some four weeks all his instructions to Bankhead indicate a determination to have nothing further to do with the defense of Mexican interests.²⁰ This was the situation, then, when Forbes's report reached London on December 13. Up to this moment, the honor of the British government had apparently been bound to a general support of Mexican authority and unity. Now, however, Aberdeen could argue that Mexico's obstinacy offered a sufficient excuse for taking advantage of Mexico's weakness, in case that weakness should bring profit to

¹⁷ F. O., Mexico, 174, no. 44, Bankhead to Aberdeen, June 29, 1844; *ibid.*, 175, nos. 65 and 62, Bankhead to Aberdeen, August 29, 1844.

¹⁸ F. O., Texas, 20, copy of despatch, Pakenham to Aberdeen, Washington, June 27, 1844.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20, copy of Cowley's no. 568, to Aberdeen, Paris.

²⁰ For the purpose of showing the causes of Aberdeen's action in relation to California, it is sufficiently exact to specify December as the turning-point in Aberdeen's general policy toward Mexico and Texas, but a more detailed explanation of all this correspondence will show that it was Pakenham's despatch of June 27 that caused the change. After receiving it, Aberdeen was fearful that his diplomatic manoeuvring might actually result in a war with the United States. The final refusal of France, in December, to act with England, was a distinct relief to him, while the obstinacy of Mexico gave him the chance to throw all the blame on that state.

England without specific British attack upon Mexican territory. Aberdeen's reply to Barron bears date of December 31, 1844, and deserves quotation at length, since, as before stated, it is the most definite instruction upon California emanating from the British Foreign Office throughout the entire period:²¹

The present position of California is evidently very critical; and it appears to be pretty clear that unless the Mexican Government bestir themselves, an outbreak will in no long time take place in that Province, which may end in its separation from Mexico. Her Majesty's Government can have nothing to do with any insurrectionary movement which may occur in California; nor do they desire that their agents in that part of the world should encourage such movement. They desire, on the contrary, that their agents should remain entirely passive.

While California continues subject to Mexico it would be obviously contrary to good faith on the part of England to encourage a spirit of resistance or disobedience in the inhabitants of the Province against their Mexican rulers. It is therefore entirely out of the question that Her Majesty's Government should give any countenance to the notion which seems to have been agitated of Great Britain being invited to take California under her protection.

Her Majesty's Government do not pretend to determine as to the propriety of any step which may be taken by the inhabitants of California towards establishing their independence. In such matters no foreign nation has any right to interfere, except it be bound to such interference by Treaty with the Mother country; which is not the case with Great Britain. It is, however, of importance to Great Britain, while declining to interfere herself, that California, if it should throw off the Mexican yoke, should not assume any other which might prove inimical to British interests. It will therefore be highly desirable that at the same time that it is intimated to the persons of authority in California that the relations which exist between Great Britain and Mexico prevent us from taking part in any proceedings of the Californians which may have for their object the separation of that province from Mexico, those persons should be clearly made to understand that Great Britain would view with much dissatisfaction the establishment of a protectoral power over California by any other foreign state.

I do not think it necessary to enter into any speculative discussion or opinions as to the possible future course of events with respect to California, but confine my observations and instructions to the aspect of affairs, and occurrences of the present moment.

Upon the same day Aberdeen wrote to Elliot in Texas notifying him of the failure of his plan for a diplomatic intervention,²² to Bankhead to the same effect, and upbraiding Mexico for her acts,²³ to Admiral Seymour on the Pacific Coast,²⁴ instructing him to be-

²¹ F. O., Mexico, 179.

²² F. O., Texas, 9, no. 13.

²³ F. O., Mexico, 172, no. 53.

²⁴ Admiralty Secretary, In-Letters, no. 5544, Addington to Barron, December 31, 1844.

come more active in counteracting French designs upon the Pacific Islands; and again, a second letter to Bankhead in comment upon the letter just addressed to Barron, of which he enclosed a copy. This second letter to Bankhead stated even more clearly than that addressed to Barron the attitude now assumed toward Mexico, and in regard to the situation in California. In it Aberdeen summarized the weakness of the Mexican government, and acknowledged that the separation of California from Mexico was probably inevitable.²⁵ He then proceeded:

It is however for the Mexican Government alone to take measures for providing against such a contingency; nor have we any ground for interposing to preserve California to Mexico, or to prevent that Province from asserting its Independence. We have, undoubtedly, no right to excite or encourage the Inhabitants of California to separate themselves from Mexico; but if the Mexican Government chooses to be wilfully blind we should in vain attempt to enlighten them.

But it may be a matter of serious importance to Great Britain that California, if it shake off the rule of Mexico, should not place itself under the protection of any other Power whose supremacy might prove injurious to British Interests.

Although, therefore, national integrity forbids us to give encouragement to the spirit of insurrection against Mexico which has evidently struck such deep root in the minds of the Californians, and still less to countenance the suggestion submitted by some of the principal Residents to Mr. Forbes with respect to the contingent Protection of their Province by Great Britain, it is not any part of our duty to supply the want of energy exhibited by their Natural Rulers, or to dissuade their subjects from taking any course, which, under a sense of misgovernment, they may think proper.

You will therefore abstain from touching on this subject with the Mexican Govt. and if any observations respecting it should originate with the Heads of the Govt. or the Secretary of State, you will use great caution and treat the matter with as much reserve as courtesy will permit.

But on the other hand you will keep your attention vigilantly alive to every credible report which may reach you of occurrences in California, especially with respect to the proceedings of the United States Citizens settled in that Province, whose numbers are daily encreasing, and who are likely to play a prominent part in any proceeding which may take place there, having for its object to free the Province from the yoke of Mexico.

These many letters, all bearing the same date, indicate the importance of the shift in British policy, and that this was, so far as Mexico, California and Texas are concerned, a *new policy* from this moment. That it did not prove in the end to be a permanent policy was due to a rapid submission upon the part of Mexico and a re-

²⁵ F. O., Mexico, 172, no. 53.

sumption of former friendly relations with that state. Aberdeen was opposed as a man of honor, and as guarding the honor of the British government, to authorizing any British agent to perform an act that might tend to stir up a revolutionary movement in California. He was not, however, unwilling to accept the fruits of that revolution, if they should fortunately fall into British hands, and he was even willing to refrain from notifying the Mexican government that revolution in California was imminent. Such a passive policy was wholly inadequate to the situation. This was understood perfectly by British agents and by those close to affairs in that province. While awaiting the reply from Aberdeen, neither Forbes nor Barron ventured to take any decided step to secure British interests, though both became more and more fearful of the speedy acquisition of California by the United States. In spite of the expulsion of Micheltoreno by Castro, and of the incoming of numerous American emigrants, both men still thought a British protectorate could easily be secured, if Great Britain would but express her willingness to assume such a protectorate.²⁶ But with the receipt of Aberdeen's instruction, May 26, their hopes of a British protectorate in the near future had to be abandoned. They were seriously discouraged and were now to turn all their efforts toward supporting the Mexican government rather than toward encouraging the establishment of an independent government in California as the only means of thwarting American designs and of offering a faint hope of securing British interests.²⁷

The British agents in California therefore remained inactive, even largely ceasing to report conditions there, and it was not until Fremont arrived in the winter of 1845-1846, nearly a year later, that Forbes was stirred to further action. The presence of Fremont was to him sufficient evidence that something was about to be undertaken by the United States to secure California. Upon January 28, 1846, therefore, he addressed to Oliveria a protest against Fremont's presence "with Soldiers" in California, stating that²⁸

In obedience to the commands of Her Majesty's Government, it is the duty of the Undersigned to state clearly and distinctly to this Departmental Government that while Great Britain does not pretend to inter-

²⁶ F. O., Mexico, 185, Barron to Bankhead, April 8, 1845; *ibid.*, 189, no. 3, Barron to Aberdeen, February 18, 1845, enclosing a letter he had written to Admiral Seymour, January 28, 1845; and no. 5, Barron to Aberdeen, April 19, 1845, enclosing two letters received from Forbes, dated January 27 and March 10, 1845.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 189, Forbes to Barron, October 24, 1845.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 196, Forbes to Barron, January 30, 1846 (in Bankhead's no. 42).

fere in the political affairs of California, she would view with much dissatisfaction, the establishment of a protectorate power over this country, by any other foreign nation.

In assuming this authority to protest, Forbes clearly exceeded any authority given him from London, but he seems to have had no doubt as to the wisdom of his act nor as to the approval of the home government. In the meantime events were moving rapidly upon the Pacific Coast, and before the Foreign Office's reply could reach Forbes, Sloat had seized Monterey. Of this, the Foreign Office was, of course, ignorant. A copy of this protest reached London in May, and Forbes was immediately disavowed by Aberdeen. On June 1, Aberdeen instructed Bankhead that while Her Majesty's government would no doubt view with dissatisfaction the presence of Fremont in California,²⁹

. . . they do not in any way approve of a British Vice Consul taking upon himself, without instructions from his Superiors, to address the Authorities of the Province in which he is residing a formal diplomatick note like that under consideration. I have accordingly to desire that you will signify to Mr. Forbes that Her Majesty's Government do not approve of his late proceeding, and wish that he should in future be more cautious in his conduct.

The reproof thus administered to Forbes came too late to have any effect upon his acts in California during the summer of 1846. It is, however, clearly evident that Great Britain had no specific design or plan with regard to California, when her foreign minister could promptly disavow so trifling an evidence of British activity as was Forbes's protest.

While British official agents in Upper and Lower California were thus definitely prohibited from direct interference in the movements in the province, other and less authoritative suggestions were being made to the government of Great Britain looking toward its acquisition. Late in 1844, McNamara, an Irish priest, appeared at the city of Mexico and laid before Bankhead a scheme for the colonization of California by Irish emigrants.³⁰ Bankhead expressed a mild interest in the plan and reported it to Aberdeen. No comment whatever, nor even an acknowledgment of its receipt, was made by that official. A more definite proposal, drawn up in specific detail, and following in its main outlines the plan earlier proposed by Pakenham, was submitted to Bankhead in July, 1845,

²⁹ F. O., Mexico, 194, no. 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 185, no. 52, Bankhead to Aberdeen, May 30, 1845. Bankhead did not report McNamara's scheme until some six months after it was first broached.

by Mackintosh, a British consul in Mexico.³¹ Business partners of Mackintosh in London were also interested in this plan, but here again, no interest was aroused at the Foreign Office, and no reply made either to Bankhead or to the promoters. Besides the proposals of Mackintosh and McNamara, there were many other suggestions from would-be statesmen, or patriotic dreamers. Nevertheless, it is true that the proposal of Pakenham and the report of Forbes are the only two communications that received careful consideration, or were officially met by the British government.

In spite, however, of the prohibition placed on British agents in California, and of the lack of interest in private schemes of colonization, it is still conceivable that secret instructions were sent to British admirals, of the purport of which British agents of merely consular rank would have no knowledge. The instructions to these admirals have always furnished matter for suspicion to American writers, and attempts have frequently been made to deduce from the movements of the British fleet instructions implying a plan by the British government to secure California. An examination of the letters to and from British admirals stationed on or near the Pacific Coast wholly negatives this suspicion and serves merely to emphasize the British government's lack of interest in California. During 1841-1842, Admiral Thomas, with headquarters at Valparaiso, wrote almost exclusively of the activities of the French in Tahiti,³² and the entire absence of any mention of California in his correspondence proves conclusively how absurd was Commander Jones's contention that one reason for the seizure of Monterey was a fear of British naval action. In 1843, this interest in the policy of France was greatly augmented. The French had seized the Friendly Islands, and Captain Paulet, of the British navy, took possession of the Sandwich Islands, where, however, native authority was very quickly restored under instructions from the British government.³³ In 1844, Admiral Seymour, now in command of the Pacific Squadron, was still primarily interested in the question of the control of the Pacific Islands. Gradually, however, as a result of somewhat urgent letters from Barron at Tepic, he began to manifest an interest in California. Still, Seymour had to obey orders, and his orders were to watch the

³¹ F. O., Mexico, 186, no. 74, Bankhead to Aberdeen, July 30, 1845. This plan is worked out in more careful detail than any other project submitted to the British government looking toward the acquisition of California.

³² Admiralty Secretary, In-Letters, no. 5512, Thomas to Admiralty Secretary, December 28, 1841. Also in same volume, Thomas to Herbert, April 23, 1842. No. 5538, Captain Nicholas to Thomas, November 10, 1843.

³³ *Ibid.*, Out-Letters, no. 1696, Secret, Addington to Barron, July 11, 1843.

French. This, in fact, was the substance of the instruction received by him from Aberdeen, bearing date of December 31, 1844—an instruction of the same date as the many instructions sent to other officials in Mexico and on the Pacific Coast.³⁴ Personally, Seymour never received any instruction directing him as to the policy he should pursue in regard to California, and for nearly a year he did not even know the contents of Aberdeen's instruction to Barron, of December 31, 1844. When finally he did receive a copy of that instruction, late in 1845, he perceived, as had Barron and Forbes, the purely passive policy imposed upon British agents. Earlier in 1845, he had been directed to proceed to the Friendly Islands,³⁵ and after some hesitation, because of his own feeling that the greater interest was in Oregon and California, he had gone to those islands by way of Honolulu.³⁶ It was not until December, 1845, that he again reached Valparaiso. Once arrived, he eagerly awaited new instructions as to Oregon and California, and at last, on March 6, 1846, addressed a letter to the Admiralty urging an increase of his forces in the Pacific.³⁷ This request was based on the belief that war with the United States was probable, and he specified the interests to be guarded in the following order: first, Oregon; second, "to observe the proceedings of the United States relative to California"; third, to protect British commerce on the Coast of South America; fourth, to attack the commerce of the United States. The greatest stress was laid on the defense of Oregon, and detailed plans were given of probable operations on that coast. Seymour's request was couched in very vigorous language, and made evident his constantly increasing anxiety with regard to a recent increase of the United States naval force in the Pacific and the uncertainty as to what that might indicate. This anxiety was further shown by a letter from Seymour to the Ad-

³⁴ Admiralty Secretary, In-Letters, no. 5544, Addington to Barton (enclosing instructions to Seymour).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 5554, Addington to Corry, March 5, 1845; Admiralty to Addington, March 6, 1845; Addington to Hamilton, March 8, 1845. Also, Out-Letters, no. 1646, Hamilton to Seymour, June 1, 1845, urging immediate departure for Tahiti to watch the French.

³⁶ Admiralty "Digest and Précis", 1845, no. 153 Y, letter from Seymour, July 3, stating that he cannot leave for Tahiti because of Oregon troubles, and letter of July 15, changing his decision and announcing his departure; Admiralty Secretary, In-Letters, no. 5561, Seymour to Corry, October 4, 1845. The "Digest and Précis" contains for each year abstracts of all Admiralty Correspondence with British Naval Officers. Because of the destruction of the greater portion of the letters themselves for this period the "Digest and Précis" furnishes almost the only available material for study.

³⁷ Admiralty Secretary, Out-Letters, no. 1696, Corry to G. Smythe, June 10, 1846, transmitting to Foreign Office Seymour's letter of March 6.

miralty, on April 7, written from San Blas, in which Seymour confessed that he had no knowledge of the whereabouts or intentions of Commodore Sloat, but suspected him of some movement toward Oregon.³⁸ No reply was received by Seymour to any of these letters or requests previous to the actual seizure of Monterey by Sloat.

Shortly after this, early in May, Seymour sent Captain Blake with the *Juno* to California. Blake's action upon the Californian coast is well known and needs no comment here. He took Forbes on board his ship and sailed to southern California, where interviews were held with Pico, but both Blake and Forbes reported that in accordance with the instructions of Aberdeen they had limited themselves, strictly, to advising Pico that he should not permit California to accept a protectorate from any foreign state.³⁹ Meanwhile, Seymour, who was becoming daily more anxious for instructions, wrote on June 13 to Bankhead, the British minister at Mexico, that he had received information that the people of California were about to hold a convention at Santa Barbara to separate from Mexico and to seek protection from some other power.⁴⁰ This movement, Seymour was informed, had originated in northern California, where partizans of the United States were strong. Here he stated:

I have little doubt that I shall find the object of that power will be obtained, either by voluntary subjection on the part of the Inhabitants, or by the United States having taken possession of the Principal Port, in consequence of the recent hostilities with Mexico. Having however detached the "*Juno*" last month with instructions to Capt. Blake, if the Inhabitants of California declared their independence of Mexico, to endeavor to induce their leaders not to place themselves under the control or subjection of any Foreign Power, I think it my duty to call at Monterey to ascertain if the Inhabitants should have come to any resolution, which will facilitate the maintenance of their independence. My expectation is entirely to the contrary; but if the connection with Mexico, which appears to have been one of the principal causes of the non-interference of Her Majesty's Government shall have been removed, it seems desirable to ascertain the state of affairs, before it is acknowledged to be irremediable.

On the same day Seymour wrote to the Admiralty in much the same terms: ⁴¹

³⁸ Admiralty Secretary, In-Letters, no. 5561.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 5562, Blake to Admiralty, August 3, 1846, enclosing two letters written by him to Seymour on July 5 and July 17; F. O., Mexico, 198, Bankhead's no. 112, enclosing two letters from James Forbes to Alexander Forbes, July 9 and 14, 1846. The first letter was written just after the trip of Forbes and Blake to see Pico; the second, when Forbes heard of Sloat's action. Alexander Forbes was acting as consul at Tepic during Barron's absence.

⁴⁰ F. O., Mexico, 197, in Bankhead's no. 91.

⁴¹ Admiralty Secretary, In-Letters, no. 5561, Seymour to Corry.

I have not, after the reports made by Captain Gordon and others to me, of the state of affairs on that coast, judged it advisable to proceed there, under the views expressed by the Earl of Aberdeen to Her Majesty's Minister in Mexico, deprecating interference, while California formed a part of the Mexican Republic; I however (as I have already reported) sent the *Juno* to Monterey and San Francisco on the 11th of May, with instructions to ascertain the Security of British Subjects, and observe what was passing.

I also directed Captain Blake, in the event of California declaring or having declared its Independence of Mexico, to use any influence he could obtain to counteract any inclination on the part of those in Authority to place themselves under the Exclusive Control or Protection of any Foreign Powers, without the participation of Great Britain; and gave him copies of Lord Aberdeen's Letters, (which I had procured since my arrival on this Coast) of the 31st of December, 1844, to Mr. Bankhead and the Consul at Tepic, of the same date, for his information.

This contingency having occurred while I remain on the Coast, I deem it right, although I can form no very favorable anticipations of a satisfactory result, to proceed to Monterey, and ascertain the actual state of affairs; and it is my intention to sail from San Blas, for that purpose, this evening.

It is noteworthy that Seymour's indicated reason for the trip to Monterey is quite different from the one given after his arrival and the discovery of Commodore Sloat in possession. By the wording of Seymour's letter to the Admiralty, it is, however, positively certain that no instruction whatever had been received by him or by the Consular Office at Tepic subsequent to Aberdeen's instruction of December 31, 1844, and it is therefore clear that Seymour was greatly hampered by the lack of more positive and recent instructions from London. Following the tenor of Aberdeen's despatch of December 31, 1844, he was certainly limited to urging upon the people of California the maintenance of their independence, and there can be no doubt that he confined himself to this in the instructions which he gave to Blake. Blake's actions did not go beyond this in any respect. Seymour left on the 14th for Monterey, where, upon finding Sloat in authority, he gave out a statement to the effect that he had merely called at the Port of Monterey on his way to the Sandwich Islands. His report to Bankhead on July 22 is very brief and contains no comment or reflection on the United States.⁴² In the light of Seymour's expressions earlier in the spring of 1846 and his request for an addition to his force on the Pacific, there can be no doubt that he personally hoped to see some step taken toward the acquisition of California. In this, he was much of the same mind as other British agents. His letters reveal that he was more

⁴² F. O., Mexico, 198.

anxious for such an opportunity than he was afterwards willing to confess. Nevertheless, neither he nor any other British agent felt free to undertake active operations to secure California to Great Britain, and all that can be said is that they were hoping for some fortunate chance that might permit them to forestall American plans while yet they observed the purely passive attitude directed by Aberdeen.

The fact that the government of Great Britain had very slight interest in California at this moment is seen in the answer given to Seymour's request for an increase of his force upon the Pacific. The official reply was prepared and forwarded at a time nearly identical with United States' seizure, but in complete ignorance of that fact. The Admiralty transmitted the request to the Foreign Office, accompanying it with a statement that in case Aberdeen really wished to have a larger force in the Pacific the ships necessary for such increase would have to be taken from the home force, and in that event the naval force at home would be reduced below the power of the French.⁴³ On this ground, the Admiralty objected to the granting of Seymour's request, unless the government was willing to find the money for an increase of the home force. In this connection, the Admiralty brought out the necessity of occupying at least two points on the Pacific—"one selected with reference to the French at Tahiti; the other with reference to the position the Americans are taking up on the N. W. Coast of No. America". This letter clearly proves that so far no instructions had been sent out by the Admiralty for the occupation of Pacific ports, and if not sent by this time it is also evident that they would not be sent at all. The Foreign Office reply to the Admiralty shows that Aberdeen had no fear of war, and hence was not in sympathy with the demand for an increase of force upon the Pacific.⁴⁴ On June 19, Addington wrote:

The proposition of Sir George Seymour for an increase of force appears to Lord Aberdeen to be entirely founded upon the supposed probability of War with the United States, or with France, or with both Countries. Lord Aberdeen does not pretend to judge what amount of force may be requisite in the Pacific for the general interests of the service: but if any material change should now be adopted, it ought, in his Lordship's opinion, to be the result of views of the policy which may be at present entertained by Her Majesty's Government upon this subject. Lord Aberdeen considers that whatever reasons may exist for rendering an addition of force necessary, the chance of war ought not to be taken as one, for of that he sees no probability.

⁴³ Admiralty Secretary, Out-Letters, no. 1696, Corry to G. Smythe, June 10, 1846.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, In-Letters, no. 5568, Addington to Corry, June 19, 1846.

This brief quotation from the Foreign Office reply to the Admiralty contains the substance of the entire letter. Its tone indeed indicates surprise that the Admiralty should ask for any large increase of force in the Pacific.

But one further incident concerned with English action in California requires mention. Although, after 1842, there were repeated rumors that Mexico had directly offered to sell or transfer California to Great Britain, the evidence already presented in this article furnishes sufficient proof of the falsity of those rumors up to 1846. More direct testimony is, however, furnished when at last the offer was actually made. In the first months of 1846 little attention was paid at Mexico to what was taking place in California,⁴⁵ but when war with the United States apparently became unavoidable anxiety rapidly developed as to the fate of California, and a plan was brought forward to place that province in the hands of Great Britain. After some preliminary interviews, Paredes, the Mexican president, officially proposed to transfer California to England as security for a loan.⁴⁶ This offer was made in May, 1846, and in reporting it to Aberdeen, Bankhead stated that: "It is an indirect offer of sale, and it is the first time that any such offer has ever been hinted at from a responsible authority."⁴⁷ This testimony is important in view of the persistent rumors of earlier offers. Bankhead was careful not to express any opinion to Paredes of the probable action of the British government, and in transmitting the matter to Aberdeen indicated doubt as to its importance. He did transmit it, however, and at the same time Paredes instructed the Mexican minister in London to press the affair officially. It is perhaps conceivable that such an offer, if made two years earlier, might have received some consideration by Aberdeen, but the time had gone when any such scheme was feasible, even if Great Britain had been favorable to it. Bankhead's despatch of May 30 containing the offer reached London shortly after a governmental political change, and it fell to Palmerston, who was again at the Foreign Office, to answer it. This letter, dated August 15, shows the new ministry adopting without material change the policy of the pre-

⁴⁵ Bankhead's interest was at this time greatly aroused by proposals, or suggestions, unofficially made by Mexicans of prominence that a solution of Mexican difficulties might be found in an overthrow of the republic and the establishment of a monarchy under a European prince. Bankhead was much attracted to the idea, and Aberdeen expressed friendly interest. The suggestion was not new, for similar plans had been in the air even as early as 1837, and even specified an *Austrian* prince.

⁴⁶ F. O. Mexico, 197, no. 73, Bankhead to Aberdeen, May 30, 1846.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

ceding government toward Mexico and the Californian question.⁴⁸ Palmerston wrote:

If the Mexican President should revert to the above proposition you will state to His Excellency that Her M's. Govt. would not at present feel disposed to enter into any Treaty for the acquisition of California: and the more so, because it seems, according to recent accounts, that the Mexican Govt. may by this time have lost its authority and command over that Province, and would therefore be unable to carry into effect its share of any arrangement which might be come to regarding it.

The incident had in truth no direct bearing upon the question of British plans in regard to California, for the offer did not come until long after British policy was definitely determined. The importance of the facts just cited lies rather in the proof furnished that but one offer of sale was ever made by Mexico, and that not until May, 1846.

The preceding account drawn from the available English documents in the Record Office is intended as a presentation of the most essential part of the evidence bearing upon the interests and intentions of Great Britain toward California. In estimating the extent of that interest and intention, it must always be borne in mind that at this time Great Britain had exactly as much right to acquire the province of California as had the United States or any other power. The possessor of the territory was Mexico, and Mexico alone had legal right to the country. When Americans made up their minds to occupy this province, and took steps to secure it, they had no more claim to it than had British citizens. This fact is sometimes lost sight of, or is clouded by American writers. With them, the existence of any plan in the mind of a British agent upon the coast was in itself an offense against so-called rightful American claims. The idea is, of course, absurd. The plan of Forbes to acquire California is in itself no more blameworthy than the plan of the American consul, Larkin. In the same way, a plan put forward by the British government would have been no more blameworthy than that originated by the American government. In fact, however, it has been shown that no such plan by the British government ever existed. Restating again, briefly, the general results of this investigation, it is shown that there was a genuine and lively interest among British agents in securing California for England, if possible, and secondly, that these agents acted wholly without instructions to this effect from their government, and were ultimately either checked or reproved for such slight openings as were made by them.

⁴⁸ F. O., Mexico, 194, no. 4.

The lack of British governmental interest in California was due to a variety of conditions, among which may be specified as of first importance general indifference to colonial expansion under any circumstances; lack of positive information about California; the relations with Mexico; and lastly and most important of all, the peculiarities of the Texas question, for here, in reality, lay the key to the whole situation. The only departure from the attitude of British governmental indifference toward California is noted in Aberdeen's instruction of December 31, 1844. This instruction was purely spasmodic and temporary, was the result of a momentary irritation with Mexico, and even it was of such a nature as to discourage British agents. The theory of an active British governmental design upon California is then wholly without foundation.

EPHRAIM D. ADAMS.